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THE MILLARVILLE RACES

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In the days of the gay 90s and the early 1900s the words Millarville and sport were practically synonymous.

Somehow it appears that in those times the job of making a living was not such an all-engrossing process. It seemed incidental to the actual living - quite the reverse from life to-day. Anyway the early ranchmen of Millarville found plenty of time for sport of all kinds.

As most of them were Old Country men they played cricket, of course. The Millarville polo and hockey teams both deserve places of note in the annals of sport in the West. Tennis was not neglected, either. Still, in a district where horses, and fast horses, were the distinguishing feature, it was the natural thing for a Race Club to evolve.

Forty years ago this July, a meeting was held at the home of M. T. Millar to discuss racing possibilities. The result was the formation of a Club as follows: President, E. J. Kieran; Sec. Treas., C. H. Kerr; Committee, M. T. Millar, H. W. Barrett, J. R. Kieran, G. C. Douglass, H. F. Nicholls, F. B. Senior, J. C. MacKinnon.

This organization is still in existence to-day although J. R. Kieran, who now holds the position of President, is the only one of the original officials still in action. His father, E. J. Kieran, known to his host of friends as "Sam Kieran" and to many lovingly known as "the Boss" served through the years as President until his death about seven years ago. His old familiar figure and hearty greeting are still missed on Race Day.

Mr. de Malharbe, more familiarly known as "the Frenchman", offered the use of his land for the race meet. The site chosen is a most picturesque spot about 30 miles south of Calgary. Here Sheep Creek obligingly goes out of it's way to enclose a horseshoe shaped tract of land which seems especially designed for race meetings. The great cottonwoods which dot the grounds provide shade for the crowd and help to give the Millarville Race Track that uniqueness which characterizes it.

Following that first Committee meeting all concerned threw themselves with great enthusiasm into the task of preparations for the great event. Before long the railings encircling the track were up. The barn and committee houses were not built until three or four years afterwards.

On a fime day in July 1905 practically the whole district gathered at the track. All horses that could lay any claim to speed were there also. The races were run off with great dispatch and enthusiasm. The judges, Ned Austin and Jack MacKinnon, officiated satisfactorily from their seat of honor in a democrat. Altogether the day was voted a great success and by common consent the event became an annual one.

Those early race meetings were outstanding days in the history of Millarville and surrounding districts. Apart from the sport angle it was the greatest community get-together of the year. In those days everyone knew everyone else, all the way from Calgary to MacLeod, and the Races presented a good opportunity for visiting. People from farther afield came the day before and stopped with friends handier to the scene of action.

Much of the same spirit has prevailed through the years and Millarville Race Day is still a day of handclasps, cheery greetings and reminiscences,- among Oldtimers at least.

The crowd, for this important event, used to start arriving some days beforehand. Cavalcades of Indians would file onto the grounds, pitch their tents and erect Indian villages in minature. Many of the racehorses arrived the night before also. Activity commenced early on the great day itself. People came riding of course, and in "rigs"of all kinds - buggies, democrats, Californian carts, even wagons.

At 10:30 the program commenced. The races were very numerous in those days; sometimes numbering as many as 12. For some years jumping competitions were held, too, but it was found that these took too much time. Another attraction was a Bucking Contest which was very popular for some years but was discontinued after 1915.

In 1909 a Steeplechase was introduced. The course was about two miles in length and comprised 9 jumps. It ran out across the little creek east of the track on to the flat to the south east. There were no fences or surveyed roads there then to bar the way. The course circled around, passed where W. J. Oliver's house now stands, down over a drop jump and back across the creek again. The drop jump was one of the worst hazards. It appeared to be a jump about 3or 4 feet high but there was a 9-foot drop on the other side.

This race required plenty of endurance and stamina on the part of both horse and rider. On at least one occasion Cecil Douglas, then of Millarville, won it on a horse that was part Clyde which he purchased from D. Evans. W. E. Deane-Freeman was usually in, pretty close to the finish, also. After three years the Steeplechase was discontinued due to lack of entries.

The Polo Pony race was once very popular but it was later abandoned. So was the Boy's race. There was always a Ladies race, a Hurdle race and an Indian race. Usually there would be 2 or 3 district races besides 2 or 3 open ones.

The Cowboy, or Stake race as it is now called, has always attracted great interest. In 1908 there were 12 entries. In those days, instead of each contestant having his stake to turn as in present competitions, two barrels were set up on the track and the field in a body made the figure 8 around them - a feat which called for clever manoeuvering on the part of horse and rider.

Speaking of the Stake race, many people will remember a $50.00 wager which grew out of a argument concerning it one year. The race was won by Norman Willans on Sleepy Tom. During the general discussion that followed, another contestant, George Bell, bet that his horse could beat Sleepy Tom in a straight dash. Sleepy Tom was a good horse. He could "turn on a nickel and give you some change" and he could run, too. Therefore Mr. Willans was delighted to accept the challenge. Arrangements were made and the race started. Sleepy Tom started off according to form and in a second or two was far in the lead. His rider looked back over his shoulder to see if his competitor was coming and how he liked the dust. Just at that moment Sleepy Tom saw the barrel still on the track. Well, he certainly knew what that was for, so he swerved and cut around that barrel in a magnificent fashion. Not so his rider - he kept right on going. George Bell cantered passed and won the wager.

During the War Years of 1916 and 1917 no races were held. But the Club came into action again for the purpose of giving financial aid to the Red Cross. An added attraction this year was a greased pig donated by B. Mitchell. The one who caught the pig could keep it - and doubtless deserved it, too. The proceeds of this day amounted to over $300.00.

Up until 1915 the Races were financed mostly by residents of the Millarville and Okotoks districts and the entries were nearly all local horses. From 1918 onward few racehorses remained in this locality. Most of the races were changed from district to open events and the necessary funds were donated chiefly by Calgary business firms and individuals.

It is interesting to note that no one connected officially with the Club has ever made any profit out of that connection. Any balance of the proceeds of one year goes over to help finance the meeting of the succeeding year.

Many fine horses have run at Millarville and many noted jockies have ridden there. Of the former, one of the most outstanding was Eunice, owned by W. H. X. Cochrane, formerly of Millarville. She was one of Alberta's best race horses in her day. Her saddle girth once broke during a race in Okotoks, and when she galloped passed the post in the lead as usual, her rider, Jack Jeffers, was riding bareback with his saddle on his arm. He couldn't be disqualified either because Eunice still carried the weight.

Another good horse was Busy Body, owned first by C. Nibbs and later by J. R. Kieran. And there were many more.

About seven years ago the Sam Kieran Memorial Cup Race in memory of Mr. E. J. Kieran was introduced. The cup is presented by Norman Willans, who is still interested in th e Millarville Races. Then just last year a Cart Race was run for the first time on this course.

Although, due to a wash-out on the track, no meeting was held for two years, the Race Club has given definite assistance to the War Effort. The Red Cross has received direct donations, the local Red Cross Society has been given the job of catering and Bonds have been purchased. Again in 1945 the Millarville Racing and Sports Society will do it's bit, and the crowds will assemble on the same old grounds.

There have been numerous changes during the last 40 years , but Sheep Creek still curves around the flat. Some new cottonwoods are growing up and yearly new horses fling up the turf. A good many familiar Race Day faces are still to be seen amongst the hundreds of new ones. And ever unchanging the Rockies stand beyond.